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## Meaning in Life among Muslim Students

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### Abstract

Meaning in life as a psychological phenomenon is only understood based on the Western perspective which calls for exploring Muslims' perception about the concept. Fifteen Muslim postgraduate students from the IIUM participated in the study. With the use of a semi-structured interview that lasted for 12-25 minutes for each participant, six themes emerged from the transcribed data. Findings reveal that Muslim students perceive that having a close relationship with God and serving His purpose helps them to perceive life to be meaningful. Implications for the study based on cultural and existential factors and religion were also discussed.

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### 1.1 Introduction

Meaning in life is a subjective concept defined by philosophers and mostly humanistic psychologists and existentialists. Victor Frankl (1984), a renowned existential psychologist, asserts that every individual has an innate desire to develop a meaning in life, which he calls will to meaning. Frankl (1984) emphasizes the natural need for humans to find conscious meaning in their lives in order to live a healthy and well-adapted life. Moreover, Reker and Wong (1988) define meaning in life as "the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment" (p. 221). Besides, Steger (2009) sees meaning in life as the manner in which people feel their lives have purpose, and how they comprehend their experiences.

From the above definitions, there is a relationship between meaning and purpose in life. Purpose in life is termed as a feeling that there is meaning to present and past life, having goals in life with a sense of directedness, and upholding a belief that gives life purpose (Ryff, 1989). So, as people tend to derive purpose from daily events and experiences, they often create meaningful lives when they define a purpose for their living (King, 2008). Thus, when individuals struggle for meaningful goals, life becomes more fulfilling and enjoyable. Hence, it can be deduced that the motivation to acquire these goals replicates a certainty that a meaningful life is worth struggling for.

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So, Frankl (1978) and Yalom (1980) uphold that a human life without existential meaning can be very unsatisfactory and may result in a devastating sense of responsibility and dejection. In contrast, Maslow (1971) postulates that people tend to devote their strength towards a particular cause as a result of their values and meaning only when the lower needs are satisfied. He views that every individual is free to choose meaning, and one's health is a function of choosing meaning that helps in the fulfilment of the inner life. Besides, attaining total fulfillment of one's meaning or purpose in life is unlikely due to the fact that existential meaning is found in peaceful and existential ideals that cannot be perfected (Maslow, 1971). In the same vein, Baumeister (1991) sees meaning as a psychological account of associations among experiences, events, and relationships. He emphasizes the significance of the self in the cause of acquiring meaning in life. He assumes that man has four forms of need that serve as motivation to gain certain things like satisfaction and meaning in one's life. Consequently, there tends to be a relationship between meaning in life and spirituality. Frankl (1988) posits that there is ultimate meaning in life, a meaning that is not dependent on others, on our projects, or even on our dignity, but a reference to God and spiritual meaning.

In contrast, secular existentialists lay great importance on the self as a fundamental theme which accounts for a person's subjective experiences like meaning in life (Badri, 1979). The position of this school of thought is that existence precedes essence, which means that the actual life of the individual is what constitutes his fundamental nature. Hence, man often creates his own values and determines a meaning to his life. Moreover, Kernohan (2008), an atheistic existentialist, views that the goal of self-actualization gives room for various aspirations that centre around this ephemeral world like freedom, self-development, pleasure, fulfilled desire, absence of suffering, contemplative bliss, etc. and what makes life meaningful. However, it is often apparent that religious beliefs tend to stimulate people to be optimistic because of its certainty. As such, Muslims believe in living a life that is religiously inclined towards attaining the mercy and blessings of Allah (SWT). Thus, there may be some marked differences as to what makes life meaningful to a Muslim compared to a non-Muslim. Hence, this study aims to explore and describe the perception of Muslim students on the meaning in life.

## **2.1 Methods**

This study employs a face to face semi-structured interview design. Semi-structured interview is an economical and rapid method for gathering information from individuals or small groups which ensures that the interview stays focused on the issue at hand, and informal enough to allow participants to introduce and discuss issues which they deem to be relevant.

### **2.1.1 Participants**

Based on the criteria that they are Muslims and undergoing their postgraduate programme at the university, a total of 15 students were sampled for this study as they voluntarily participated in the face-face interview. This was determined on the basis of theoretical saturation (the point in data collection when new data no longer bring additional insights to perception of meaning in life as a Muslim). As Seidman (1998) puts it, "the criteria for determining the numbers of participants depended on sufficiency and saturation of information" (p. 48).

The demographic data of the 15 participants who were interviewed in this study comprises of ten males and five females. In all, 53% were Africans (five Nigerians, two Guineans, one Algerian, and one Ivorian), 33% were from South-East Asia (two Malays, one Indian, one Bangladeshi and one Pakistani), and one student from Maldives. All were Muslim postgraduate students within the age bracket of 21-40 at the International Islamic University Malaysia.

## **3.1 Analysis**

The research analysis in this study produced a total of six main themes that are related to Muslims' perception of meaning in life on one hand, and Muslim's sources of meaning on the other. As mentioned earlier, four of the themes emerged from the former, while the other two themes emerged from the latter. The main themes included meaning is to serve God's purpose, life is a test, life as a means to an end, subjective value orientation, meaning as a virtue and meaning as coherence in life as shown in Figure 1 below

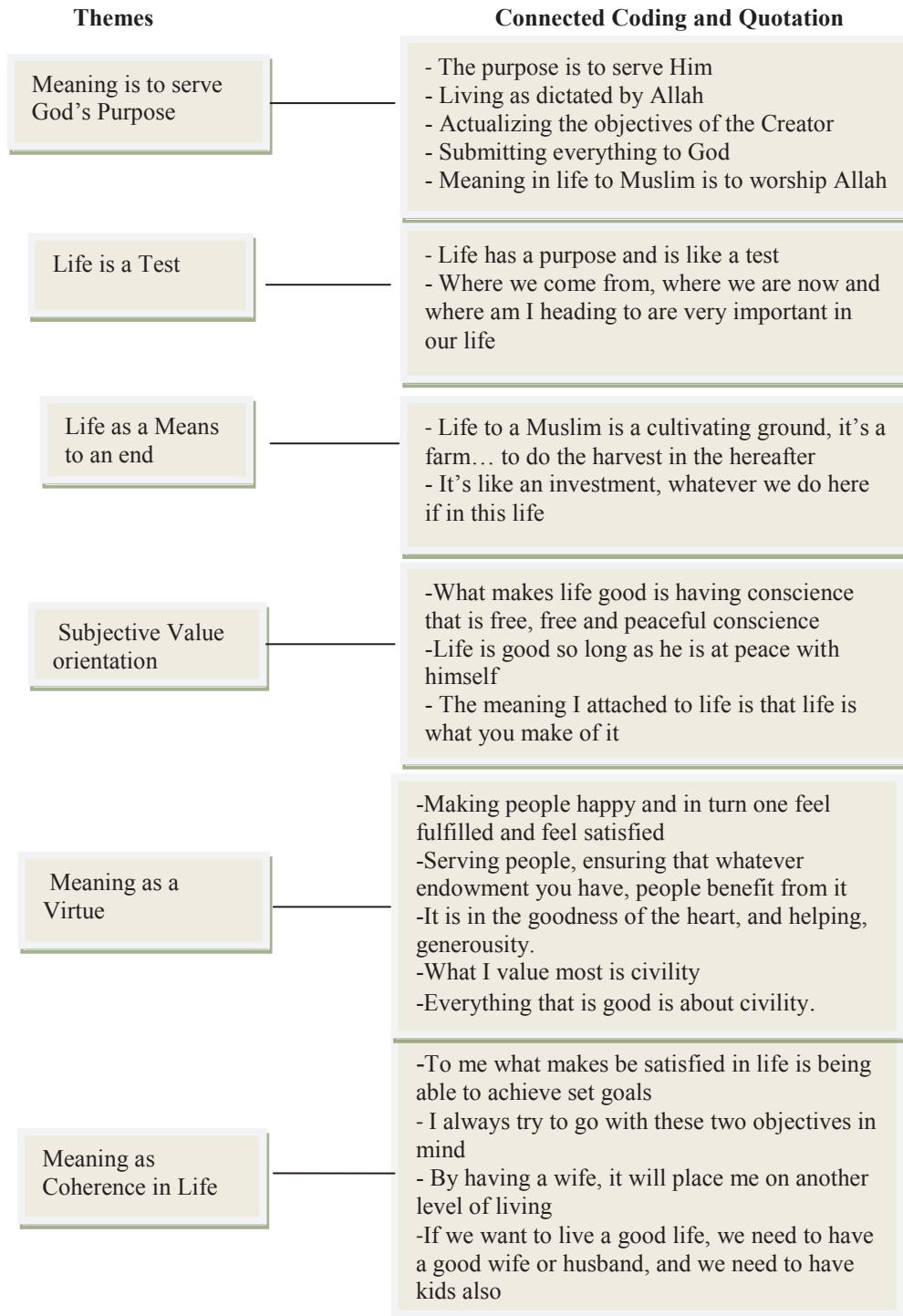


Figure 1 Themes and connected coding and quotations.

#### **4.1 Conclusion**

The primary finding of this study was that Muslim students perceived existential meaning from both spiritual and material factors of life. The concept of meaning from a Muslim's perspective reflects a holistic and comprehensive phenomenon as both religious and worldly elements tend to be linked in one form or the other. There is some form of interaction among the themes, and as such, each theme is critical to the overall formation of Muslims' perception of meaning. This can be related to the views and assertions of the spiritually oriented existentialists like Frankl (1988).

Meaning in life remains an outward or external factor in that what makes a person attains meaning lies with his spiritual relationship with a Supreme Being, the ability to live a life that is not only material in nature, but guided by spiritual beliefs and inclinations. All the themes that resulted from the first interview question supported this spiritual-earthly dimension of what promotes a sense of meaning among Muslim students. This position is also upheld by Bourne (1997) who stipulates the relationship as a basis for understanding what promotes existential meaning.

Moreover, it could be deduced that being able to achieve one's aims and goals in life in coherence, which is evident among the themes, was part of the Muslim students' perception of meaning. Attaining worldly goals like scholarship, higher academic qualification, lucrative job, marital life etc. were part of the goals mentioned by the participants in which if attained in coherence would help improve one's sense of meaning. This can be related to the findings of McGregor and Little (1998) that project integrity is correlated with elevated meaning. Also, life may be experienced as meaningful when it is perceived to have purpose or to have coherence, and also have significance beyond the trivial or momentary earthly experience (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006).

Furthermore, the relationship between the themes showed a holistic perception of meaning in life among Muslim students. Similarly, O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) found that the highest occurrence of meaningful experiences were those related to personal development, religion and spirituality, and relationships with people. So, whatever aspiration a Muslim gives priority to, be it spiritual or secular in nature, is a function of his personal and subjective value orientation. Thus, the goal a Muslim hopes to achieve does contain what is inherent in this world and the next. In summary, it could be assumed that, despite a Muslim's spiritual element to a meaningful life, there tends to be some worldly elements as well. As mentioned earlier, the second theme, life test as a source of meaning also serves as contribution to existing knowledge which is linked to what another spiritually inclined psychologist, Bourne (1997) mentioned. He viewed that life stands as a training ground for something that cannot be fully understood or acquired in this earthly existence. Hence, Muslims perceive that meaningful life is to serve God's purpose and living a life that is linked to an eternal life on one hand, and attaining existential meaning from worldly goals and moral virtues on the other.

It is also obvious that the third theme which reflects life as a means to an end is closely related to one of the Islamic scholars, Al-Ghazali (1954), who points out that those who seriously reflect on the past eternity during which the world does not exist, and the future perpetuity during which it will not be in existence, will clearly see that the world in essence, is like a crossing point. Although this study has added to the body of literature regarding Muslims' perception of meaning in life, more research would expand the field of spiritual and existential psychology and better equip psychologists and mental health professionals. The researcher suggests that future research should repeat the study using a larger sample size, increase the number of research questions, and also make use of a more diverse sample with varying socioeconomic levels, and from among private and government workers.

Despite with the use of a face-to-face, semi-structured interview with the participants, there is need for additional demographic information of the participants which can be of better benefit in regards to having background knowledge of their religious orientation, values, and other existential related constructs. Besides, extending to other denominations of specific traditions within Muslims like Shiites could provide further contextual information as this study on samples Sunni Muslims. To see the similarities and differences among the three major faiths on existential meaning, it will be of great benefit if more research could focus on samples on those views upholding Christianity and Judaism.

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